Kathryn Grant Her Life and Legacy

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There are several 1950s-era actresses whose careers were overshadowed by their high-profile marriages. It happened to Rosemarie Bowe (Robert Stack), Neile Adams (Steve McQueen), and Kathryn Grant (Bing Crosby). After her death on September 20, 2024, I thought I'd revisit the career of Kathryn Grant. I saw her in *The Wild Party* (1956) and was impressed by her role as a teenager who exhibits a range of emotions in what I consider an award-worthy performance. This wide-eyed brunette was talented, ambitious, and gorgeous. It is unfortunate that following her passing, there was rarely any interest in her; those who did recognize her tended to focus more on her association with Bing Crosby rather than on her individual accomplishments. Kathryn gave us a multifaceted legacy that includes motion pictures, business ventures, and literary works that deserve recognition.

Olive Kathryn Grandstaff was born on November 25, 1933, in Houston, Texas. Her father was a commissioner, her mother a schoolteacher. She made her on-stage debut at the age of three after winning a talent-based competition called Tiny Tots Revue, organized by the Wright-Dore School of Dance. It would be several years before she made headlines by winning pageants like Miss Buccaneer-Navy, where she was awarded a trophy, luggage, and a vacation, and Queen of the Texas Lions. It's unknown why, but her parents sent her to live with her aunt in nearby Robstown when she was a teenager.

Kathryn was a star at Robstown High School, whether it was the arts, academics, or athletics. Her love of sports led to her winning various statewide tournaments in both tennis and golf. She, who at this point had become a proficient pianist and ballerina, had resumed pageants upon enrolling at the University of Texas. One such pageant was at the annual Fat Stock Show, where, in addition to being crowned Queen, met with Roy Rogers, an icon in Hollywood who happened to be one of the judges. When Kathryn inquired about being in the movies, Roy said, "Get yourself some experience first." That's exactly what Kathryn did, studying drama and appearing in on-campus productions like *First Lady*, *The Enchanted*, *Dear Brutus*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*.

When Kathryn felt ready to try the movies, she flew to Hollywood and got in touch with Roy Rogers. He sent photographs of the budding starlet to an employee at Paramount Pictures named Pat Duggan, and four days later, was given a contract. It seemed like a wonderful start to a successful career until the studio cast her in forgettable walk-on roles in *Arrowhead* (1953), *Forever Female* (1953), and *Rear Window* (1954). If that wasn't disappointing enough, the studio asked her to lose weight. She was savvy and understood that her contract was going nowhere, so she enrolled at the University of California, Los Angeles, to continue her undergraduate studies, and got a part-time gig writing for several newspapers in Texas about her experiences in Hollywood. Her instincts were right, as the studio released her from her contract the following year.

It seemed like that was the end of Kathryn's rise to stardom, but as luck would have it Columbia's Harry Cohn enlisted casting director Maxwell Arnow to find a replacement for Donna Reed whose contract was terminated. He prepared Kathryn for an interview with Cohn, and in 1954 she was given a seven-year contract with Columbia Pictures starting at $150 a week. Kathryn would have a great several years at the studio. Harry Cohn liked her a lot; he admired her assertiveness, sass, and ambition. He was supportive of her relationship with Bing Crosby—more on that later—and they'd engage in playful banter. He was even quoted as saying to her, "Don't use your damned education on me" when she used her college-level vocabulary while they argued. He even let her do an exposé on her on-set experiences to satisfy degree requirements.

They paired Kathryn with a great acting teacher named Benno Schneider and immediately began casting her in movies. She won critical acclaim for *Cell 2455 Death Row* (1955) and *Storm Center* (1956), and had starring roles in *The Phenix City Story* (1955) and *The Last Frontier* (1955), with the latter being recast so she could focus on the former. Kathryn auditioned for the role of Clarabel Tilbee in *Glory* (1956), but was ultimately not chosen as the director found her performance "too big and so forth." She co-starred in *Mister Cory* (1957), with Tony Curtis, with Film Bulletin praising her as "an attractive fem foil."

Kathryn Grant and Bing Crosby were both on contract with Paramount Pictures when they met. During the filming of *White Christmas* (1954), Bing was in between rehearsals when the petite starlet approached him to request

Kathryn Grant and Anthony Quinn in The Wild Party (1956).

Kathryn Grant and Biff McGuire in The Phenix City Story (1955).

Kathryn Grant and Gilbert Roland in The Big Circus (1959).

an interview. Afterwards, they grew close, with Kathryn telling him about her love of journalism, to which Bing said, "Quit writing and start acting." He subsequently introduced her to Ken Murray, who got her several guest-starring roles on his television series. I don't know what attracted Kathryn to Bing, but she pursued him for years. His secretary once told me that Kathryn would telephone Bing at the studio, inviting him to her apartment for spaghetti.

According to Kathryn, they were supposed to tie the knot in 1955, but Bing canceled the wedding without giving a clear explanation as to why. Kathryn returned to Hollywood distraught, telling Cohn that she wanted to "work very hard... right now" in the movies. Cohn, understanding that Kathryn's debacle with Bing made headlines, sent her on a nationwide tour. She decided to throw herself into her work, co-starring in *The Guns of Fort Petticoat* (1957) and *Operation Mad Ball* (1957), which were both box-office successes. She was surprised when she got the role in the latter film, saying, "I'm just not funny." *The Brothers Rico* (1957) had her opposite Richard Conte, in what was a distressing several weeks as Kathryn was long-distancing Bing and became worried when she couldn't get a hold of him. Mimi Gibson, who appeared in the movie, wrote in her memoirs Working Kid that people on the set were concerned for her.

Kathryn and Bing were wed on October 24, 1957, at St. Anne's Church in Las Vegas, Nevada, with a reception at the Sands Hotel and a honeymoon in Palm Springs, California. It was something that dominated headlines across the country, and those who were close with the couple were surprised because it was so unexpected. The newlyweds seemed happy, but their relationship wasn't well-received by everyone. Bing's brother Bob Crosby would later acknowledge his resentment for his sister-in-law in Crosby in Search of Crosby: Bing the Truth Behind the Legend. This sentiment was echoed by other Crosbys over the years, including her stepsons.

Harry Cohn continued to cast Kathryn in movies for the duration of her contract, despite Bing's urging that she no longer work. Her newfound notoriety as "Kathryn Crosby" brought in a lot of money for the studio. *Gunman's Walk* (1958) and *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (1958) were box-office successes, with the latter being one of the most popular movies of the 1950s, despite rushed filming due to Kathryn's pregnancy. *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) was immensely successful, but wasn't one of her best performances. Her relationship with its director, Otto Preminger, proved tense as well. She insisted that she choose her own wardrobe and wear curls, and found it hard trying to balance her undergraduate studies with memorizing the script. Frank J. Parker wrote in The Anatomy of a Murder Trilogy: A Classic Trial, Book, and Film, that Kathryn forgot her lines which resulted in the director pairing her with a coach to re-rehearse.

Kathryn Grant and Kerwin Mathews in The 7th Voyage of Sinbad (1958).

The Big Circus (1959) was one of the more interesting movies I've ever seen, putting actors like Gilbert Roland in a circus doing trapeze acts. Kathryn demonstrated her devotion to filmmaking by doing her own stunts, dislocating her shoulders in the process. Barbette, a former circus performer and consultant on the set, said that he's "trained thousands of girls in my time, and truly I've never seen anything like her." While in Europe, Kathryn did *1001 Arabian Nights* (1959). It was a few days of recording and she didn't have to read a script. It was perhaps the easiest work she did with the studio. Afterwards, she stopped doing movies and became a nurse, something that she was inspired to do after visiting war-torn Korea a decade prior.

It was the end of an era for this once-promising starlet who left Hollywood to devote herself to her sons and daughter. She hosted *The Kathryn Crosby Show* and sporadically appeared onstage with Bing Crosby until his death on October 14, 1977. Kathryn eventually returned to the stage and, in addition to attending galas and charities while visiting friends like Rosemary Clooney and Marion Ross, published several books including My Life with Bing and a cookbook. She was very protective of her late-husband's legacy, rarely speaking about their marriage in interviews.

Kathryn Grant and Tony Curtis in Mister Cory (1957).

I spoke with Kathryn a couple of years before her death and asked her if she wanted to do an interview with us. She wasn't keen on the idea, but exhibited class and decorum during our conversation. She was such a lovely lady.